

# Tribes turn up the heat on hot-springs change

**CHINA LAKE NAVAL WEAPONS CENTER, Calif.** — In this dry and rugged country, home of the desert kit fox, Mojave ground squirrel and cotton-top cactus, California's newest geothermal energy field coexists with nature, the Navy and hundreds of Native Americans.

The coexistence is not always peaceful.

In late March, the Paiute-Shoshone Council, representing 1,060 members in seven tribes in California and Nevada, offered up its latest protest to the just-completed \$615-million Coso Geothermal Project.

Earlier this year, the last of nine generators came on line at the Coso project, developed by California Energy Co.

At issue is the Coso Hot Springs, located in the heart of this huge and hush-hush weapons-testing range.

For the Indians, the hot springs hold religious significance much the same way that volcanoes are important to some people in Hawaii as a manifestation of the ancient goddess Pele.

The Coso springs have been the focus of medicinal pilgrimages since

prehistoric times and in 1976 were designated a national historic site.

"We'd use the mud for ailments, as a salve," says Sandra Jefferson Yonge, tribal leader of the nearby Lone Pine Indian Reservation, home to 235 native Americans. "We'd use the steam for sweat purposes, a medicinal type of activity... You can't separate religion and your medicine and the Earth."

But now the springs are changing — sprouting hotter-than-normal steam and mud volcanoes — and the council blames the adjacent geothermal plants, also on Navy land.

"The site has been desecrated," says Yonge.

At the Navy's request after the tribes' initial protest last year, California Energy paid a consultant to look at the problem to determine if the reinjection of geothermal fluids from the Coso plants could account for the changes at the springs.

The conclusion: it could not.

Unsatisfied, the tribes asked for a review by two geothermal scientists who found the consultant's report "substandard," said Yonge.

Now she's asking the Navy to kick in \$60,000 so the council can commis-

sion its own study.

If a second study finds the Coso project at fault, "we fully expect that the Navy will enforce its contract with California Energy Co. to implement a mitigation plan to lessen, if not eliminate, the destruction and desecration of Coso Hot Springs," says Yonge. "The heritage of all Americans is at stake here."

California Energy officials say the Coso Hot Springs are most likely undergoing natural changes typical of centuries-long cycles of geothermal activity.

— Jim Borg

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